



UPDATE

Virginia Keeps America Moving

Winter 2001

VTA Has \$142.6 Million For I-81 *Money Will Be Used For Safety Projects, Widening Preparations*



Charles D. "Chip" Nottingham

Dear I-81 Neighbors,

During the past year there has been much public discussion concerning the Virginia Transportation Act of 2000 that was passed by the General Assembly and signed by Gov. Gilmore.

This bill is the first significant transportation legislation in more than a decade

for Virginia and a hallmark of progress for our Commonwealth. The projects brought forward in this legislation and the existing projects in the old Virginia Department of Transportation Six-Year Improvement Program have been combined by the Commonwealth Transportation Board to form the Transportation Development Program – a six-year financial planning document bringing more than \$10 billion worth of projects to Virginia's transportation infrastructure. Thanks to VTA 2000, there is \$142.6 million designated specifically for Interstate 81. Much of this funding will go directly into short-term projects that will either address important safety needs or will help prepare the roadway for the widening to come.

As indicated in the I-81 public meetings held during the ten I-81 studies, most of the bridges along the corridor will have to be replaced to accommodate the wider roadway. Work on many of these bridges will begin within the next five years. Additionally, Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) projects are targeted and being developed for implementation within the next couple of years. Some of these new features will include

additional permanent changeable message signs, highway advisory radios and weather/pavement sensing devices. We also are working on safety enhancement projects such as lengthening acceleration and deceleration ramps and installing new guardrail.

While the short-term work is being done, engineering designers will be developing final plans for designated areas along the corridor. These plans will be presented to the public showing the specific location and design features to be constructed when the road is widened and interchanges modified. Construction is already under way in the Bristol area and in the Christiansburg area. This newsletter will update you on every project that is under way or in the planning stages.

I-81 is garnering national as well as local and statewide attention. The planning process is being observed closely by many other state departments of transportation officials and industry leaders who face similar situations. It also has received recent mention in USA Today and on the CNN Web site. We stand in the midst of a very exciting time that will literally shape how I-81 will look and function in the 21st Century, transforming it from a crowded roadway to a national model of transportation efficiency.

Charles D. "Chip" Nottingham
Commonwealth Transportation Commissioner

I-81 Progress Report

Bristol District

VTA Construction began in spring 1998 to widen to six lanes the section of I-81 from south of Exit 74 in Tennessee to north of Exit 7 in Virginia.

Work was completed in fall 2000 on the section from Exit 74 in Tennessee to south of Exit 3 in Virginia, which included reconstructing the Route 58 interchange (Exit 1, Gate City Highway). English Construction Co. of Lynchburg was the contractor. The total project cost, including design, right-of-way acquisition and construction, was \$29 million. (The State of Tennessee funded its segment.)

Work continues on the second widening project from just south of Exit 3 to just north of Exit 7, along with modifications

to the Exit 5 interchange with Route 11 (Lee Highway). Eight bridges are being reconstructed on the project. Jones Brothers Inc. of Mount Juliet, Tenn., is the contractor on the project. The total estimated cost of the project, including design, right-of-way acquisition and construction is about \$53 million. The estimated completion date is summer 2002.

VTA VDOT is designing the reconstruction of two Abingdon interchanges, Exits 14 and 17. A public hearing for the Exit 14 project will be held in late 2001. Once the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) approves a design, expected in early 2002, the right-of-way process should begin in mid-2002, with a construction advertisement date of late 2003.

Design work continues on the Exit 17 project. A preliminary field inspection is scheduled for spring 2001, with a public hearing slated for summer 2001. The CTB is expected to approve the design in late 2001, with the right-of-way process beginning in early 2002. Due to the number of properties affected, right-of-way acquisition is expected to take 2 1/2 years. A tentative construction advertisement date is mid-2004.

I-81/I-77 Overlap Location Study

In September 2000, the CTB approved the selection of Hayes, Seay, Mattern & Mattern, Inc., Roanoke, to conduct a location study in Wythe County. VDOT will hold a meeting in early 2001 to introduce the study team to local officials, community leaders, other agencies and news media, and to inform the public about the process.

The purpose of the study is to develop alternatives to alleviate congestion on the overlap, which was determined to be a top priority for I-81 improvements in the Bristol transportation district.

The earlier improvement study of the 11-mile overlap section looked at alternatives to widen the interstate in its present location, and the feasibility of separating the two interstates. However, it was determined that a more detailed, exhaustive review of all potential alternatives, including a "no build" alternative, must be performed before a decision can be made.

During the comprehensive location study, the study team will perform an in-depth review considering environmental and cultural/historical information, economic and right-of-way effects, terrain, geology, constructability, impact of traffic during construction, safety, and how proposed locations would serve the nation's interstate network.

VDOT will continue to work closely with the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration, as it did during all phases of the I-81 Improvement Study.

VTA 2000

A number of Interstate 81 projects have been given priority status by the General Assembly in VTA 2000. More than \$75 million has been designated to start or complete a variety of these projects in the next six years. Some are under way, some will begin soon, and others require design and preliminary work before construction commences. Projects that have this special priority are listed with a **VTA** flag on the following pages.

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There will be opportunities for the public and local government officials to participate in various stages of the location study, which typically takes about 24 months to complete.

Salem District

VTA Median guardrail. In many locations, VDOT has upgraded guardrail with a more crash-resistant version for today's vehicles. Next, VDOT will look at I-81's median to see which locations might benefit from some type of barrier to help lessen the impact of crossover crashes. VDOT will look at places where the median is less than 40 feet wide, and Botetourt County is the first priority. Adding a barrier in the median is complicated because I-81 is not flat. In many places the northbound lanes are higher than the southbound lanes, and vice versa, making construction in the median difficult. Adding guardrail is costly, but the VTA 2000 makes it possible.

VTA Acceleration/deceleration lanes.

Many interchanges on I-81 do not function well because they were designed 40 years ago when there was much less traffic, especially truck traffic. So engineers are looking at the interchanges to identify places where lanes can be lengthened for safer merging movements. Some problem areas were revealed by VDOT's I-81 widening studies, and modifications will be made:

1. **Exit 162 near Buchanan.** To improve this location, the lanes and bridge will have to be widened. Lanes are being designed now, and construction should begin in early 2003.
2. **Exits 114 & 109 in Montgomery Co.** These exits connect with Route 8 at Christiansburg and Route 177 in Radford. Construction bids are expected to go out in winter 2001 for a contractor to build acceleration and deceleration lanes at these exits.
3. **Exit 143 - I-581 interchange in Roanoke County.** Drivers traveling from I-581 to I-81 encounter a short merging space. Work will begin next spring to lengthen these acceleration lanes.

Lower speed limit in store for Roanoke and Harrisonburg areas

On Jan. 19 the speed limit will be reduced from 65 mph to 60 mph in the Roanoke and Harrisonburg areas, based upon a safety analysis conducted by VDOT's Traffic Engineering Division.

In the Roanoke area, 14.7 miles of I-81 are affected: from about one mile south of Route 112 (Exit 137) to about one mile north of Route 220 (Exit 150).

In the Harrisonburg area, more than six miles are affected: from about one mile south of Route 11 (Exit 243) to about 1.5 miles north of the Route 33 (Exit 247)

"Lowering the speed limit will help improve safety in these two areas, and we will continue to look for more ways to make driving safer along the entire I-81 corridor," Commonwealth Transportation Commissioner Charles D. "Chip" Nottingham said.

VTA Rock fence in Montgomery County.

To catch rocks on a mountainous section of I-81 between Christiansburg and Ironto, VDOT will install a fence like the one on I-64 on Afton Mountain.

VTA More rumble strips. VDOT has added rumble strips to I-81 in recent years, but in some places where the pavement isn't strong enough, VDOT will rebuild and pave the shoulders and add rumble strips. Nationwide, rumble strips are credited with preventing 70 percent of run-off-the-road crashes.

VTA High-tech communications. A network of message signs and highway advisory radio will be built in the Roanoke and New River valleys. These message signs will provide real-time information to drivers about conditions on I-81 so they can adjust their travel if they wish. Locations are being identified, but expect to see

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I-81 Progress Report

signs on I-81 and at junctions at I-581, routes 460 and 8 in the New River Valley, and Plantation Road and Electric Road in the Roanoke area.

Construction Projects

VTA Christiansburg. Construction on the Route 460 interchange began in spring 1998, and work is about 75 percent complete.

This project includes construction of 10 bridges and the replacement of two bridges.

Collector-distributor lanes have been completed, and I-81 traffic has been shifted to these lanes while other work proceeds. Exit 118B opened in August, allowing motorists to access the Route 460 Bypass toward Blacksburg without having to pass through the busy Route 11/460 area.

Branch Highways of Roanoke has this contract, worth almost \$49 million. Estimated completion is summer 2001.

Design Projects

Montgomery County. VDOT staff is designing extensions of acceleration and deceleration lanes at Exit 109 (Route 177) at Radford and Exit 114 (Route 8) at Christiansburg. A total of \$3 million has been budgeted for improvements on these interchanges.

VTA Roanoke Valley. The CTB has budgeted \$21 million to be allocated over three years to widen I-81 in the Roanoke Valley. This 16-mile section begins south of Wildwood Road in Roanoke County and extends to two miles north of Exit 150 in Botetourt County.

Consultants are designing the project's six segments (listed below) including new interchanges. Ground and aerial survey work has been completed.

Roanoke County

- Site-Blauvelt Engineers of Richmond was selected for a 2-mile portion of this project, including Exit 137 (Route 112, Wildwood Road). Design work began in June 2000.

- Gannett Fleming of Newport News was selected for a 2.5-mile segment, including Exit 140 (Route 311, Thompson Memorial Drive). Design work began in June 2000.
- David Volkert & Associates of Alexandria was selected for a 2.2-mile segment, including Exit 141 (Route 419, Electric Road). Design work began in May 2000.
- URS Corp. of Richmond was selected for a 1.4-mile segment, including Exit 143 (Interstate 581). Design work began in May 2000.
- Gannett Fleming of Newport News was selected for a 3-mile segment, including Exit 146 (Route 115, Plantation Road). Design work began in June 2000.

Botetourt County

- Hayes, Seay, Mattern & Mattern of Roanoke was selected for a 5-mile segment, including Exit 150 (Route 220). Design work began in April 2000.

A combined citizen information meeting on these design projects will be held in summer 2001. Public hearings on all design will be held later in project development.

Staunton District

VTA Rockbridge County

Widen and rehabilitate northbound and southbound bridges over Route 11 at Timber Ridge. Allocation for FY2000-01 is \$3.7 million. Project could be advertised for bids early in 2002. Estimated cost: \$3,680,000.

Widen northbound and southbound bridges at Route 716 and Mill Creek. Project could be advertised for bids early in 2002. Estimated cost: \$3,910,000.

Replace bridge at Route 712 over I-81. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2002. Estimated cost: \$1,265,000.

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VTa Rockingham County

Extend pedestrian box culvert under I-81 at James Madison University. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2002. Estimated cost: \$180,000.

Widen and rehabilitate bridges over C&W Railroad and Blacks Run. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2004. Estimated cost: \$5,780,000.

Replace bridge over Country Club Road and C&W Railroad. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2005. Estimated cost: \$5,280,000

Replace and widen bridge to four lanes on Stone Spring Road over I-81. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2004. Estimated cost: \$2,076,000.

VTa Frederick County

Move crossover 0.2 mile south of Route 50 and extend southbound acceleration lane. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2001. Estimated cost: \$210,000.

Widen southbound off ramp to two lanes at Route 277 in Stephens City. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2001. Estimated cost: \$550,000.

Widen bridge on Route 669 over I-81 at Whitehall. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2002. Estimated cost: \$6,825,000.

Widen northbound and southbound bridges over Abram's Creek and extend acceleration and deceleration lanes. Construction advertisement projected for spring 2004. Estimated cost: \$8,400,000.

Districtwide

Implement intelligent transportation systems such as variable message boards, pavement weather sensors, permanent overhead message boards, and radios. Estimated cost: \$1,550,000.

Design Projects

VTa Rockbridge County. The CTB has approved three projects to widen I-81 in Rockbridge County, covering 11.1 miles from milepost 190.9 to milepost 202. Design work has begun. Construction on the southbound side will begin in 2003. Construction on the northbound side will start in 2005. Design also is in the works for widening the Buffalo Creek and Maury River bridges. Included in the Buffalo Creek project is a truck climbing lane leaving the bridge on the northbound side. Construction on the truck climbing lane and the two bridges is scheduled for spring 2002.

Rockingham County. Preliminary design work has begun on widening 12.4 miles of I-81 through Rockingham County and Harrisonburg. A timetable for construction has not been established, and public meetings will be scheduled later in the project. The widening will take place from milepost 240.6 to milepost 253 in three projects. Two Richmond consulting firms, RK&K and Site-Blauvelt, have been selected to design two of the projects. VDOT will design the third section.

Frederick County. Design work has begun for widening 8 miles of I-81 in Frederick County and Winchester. A timetable for construction has not been established, and public meetings will be scheduled later in the project. The widening will take place from milepost 312 to milepost 320 in three projects. Two Richmond consulting firms, Wiley & Wilson and Burgess-Niple, have been selected to design two of the projects. VDOT will design the third section. ■

Travel Shenandoah Provides Unique Information Service For Motorists

Want directions to a destination in the Shenandoah Valley? Travel Shenandoah would be a good place to start.

Looking for a place to spend the night or eat a meal between Lexington and Winchester? Travel Shenandoah can help with that, too.

Travel Shenandoah can even save travelers time by providing information on accident scenes, weather conditions or highway work zones along 150 miles of Interstate 81.

Available since July 24 and technically known as an advanced traveler information system (ATIS), the service evolved from a study on the needs of travelers in a rural area. It is the only such service of its scope in a rural area anywhere in the country.

Travel Shenandoah provides Traffic and travel conditions, food and lodging information, traveler services, tourism events and attractions, emergency services, and trip mapping. The service is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Travel Shenandoah can be reached by calling 1-800-578-4111 or clicking <http://www.travelvirginia.org>.

A paging service is planned to alert subscribers to accidents or other obstructions. Traffic alerts also will be provided on message signs along the highway and highway advisory radio.

The service is being developed and operated by a public/private partnership involving the Virginia Department of Transportation, Shenandoah Telephone Co. (SHENTEL), the Virginia Tourism Corp., Virginia Tech's Transportation Institute, the Virginia State Police, and the National Park Service.

VDOT work zones are reported to the service as they are set up and plotted on a map on the Travel Shenandoah website. When people click on a work zone icon, information about that work zone appears. VDOT and the Virginia State Police also report accidents to the service, and that information also appears on the map. Travel Shenandoah's automated voice system passes the information along to callers, including those on the road who call by cellular or digital phone.

So far, the Travel Shenandoah website is averaging about 4,000 hits a month, and the phone line is getting about 600 calls a month.

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